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The Emergence of Islamic Feminism: An Overview

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Abstract:

With the emergence of feminist discourse some discrepancies arise in the manner of study, nature of interpretation, and application of feminist theories to unearth underlying deep-rooted structures of the patriarchal social system. This is why, many feminists or women rights activists who belong to Islam feel the need for a different structure and pattern to interpret the prevailing patriarchal thoughts that are hidden in the garb of interpretation of the Quran. Islamic feminists are different from mainstream feminism, regarding its subject matter and interpretation of religious texts. The objective of this research paper is to introduce the reader with the basic knowledge of Islamic feminism which studies feminism within the framework of *Quran*.

Keywords: Feminist Theory, Gender studies, Islamic Feminism, Islamic Text and Theology, Muslim-women, Patriarchy, *Sharia*, *Fiqh*.

Feminism as an academic discipline came into existence in the 1960s. Gradually, it evolved into the form of a global movement that juddered the very foundations of the way the world thinks or acts as far as the female-question is concerned. It is a critique of patriarchy as a system and scrutinizes how patriarchy distorts the relationship between men and women. The term ‘feminism’ has originated from the Latin word ‘*femina*’ meaning ‘woman’ (through French ‘*feminisme*’). Feminism is, in fact, a sincere effort to examine, comprehend and explain how and why femininity or the feminine sensibility is different from masculinity or the masculine experience. Feminism holds up the view of the site of differences that characterize the ‘feminine identity’ or ‘feminine psyche’ or ‘femininity’ of women. It highlights the psychosomatic, social and cultural construction of femininity vis-a-vis masculinity. Mary Wollstonecraft published one of the first feminist treatises, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), in which she advocated the social and

moral equality of the sexes. Wollstonecraft is acknowledged as the precursor of British Feminism and her ideas formed the thoughts of the suffragists, who campaigned for the women's vote.

Like any other subject, the development of feminism also went through from different formative periods or *waves*. The first wave of feminism is the period of late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, that came into being as a result of robust urban industrialism, liberal, and socialist politics and its impact over the whole society. Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir are two significant women thinkers who are directly connected to this first wave of feminism. Simon de Beauvoir's landmark book *The Second Sex* (1949) is believed to mark the transition from first to second wave feminism. The second wave is assumed to have been inspired by Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), where she recognizes dissatisfaction and restlessness among contemporary women. And, Third wave feminism arises as a response to the perceived failures and backlash against initiatives and movements created by second wave feminism during the 1960s to 1980s, and the realization that women are of many colours, ethnicities, nationalities, religions and from varied cultural backgrounds with their respective unique interests and concerns. They argue that women are not a homogeneous class, so the experiences of a woman living in India or in Africa cannot be compared with that of a white woman banker on Wall Street. Thus, they refined feminist theory to call attention to the other crucial factors in gender identities, namely, caste, class and religion; race, ethnicity and geography; legal rights and wage legislation.

Islamic feminism as a theory might be traced back to the 1990s, but now it is gaining wide attention from scholars from all over the globe. On account of prevalent sexist and unjust notions, perceptions and beliefs about womankind in the 'interpretation' of various Islamic texts within different schools of theology in Islam, Muslim women scholars felt the only way to be liberated intellectually, socially, politically and economically is to reinterpret all the sacred texts and to write down their own literature based on the equity, fairness and justice. I stressed the word 'interpretation' because the act of interpretation of the sacred texts is not only a scholarly task but also a highly political one as theorists, Raines and Maguire, write in his treatise; they assert:

It is a contentious terrain precisely because it continues to deeply affect people in their daily lives. Yes, interpreting the sacred is a scholarly task but it is also a highly political task because interpreting the sacred shapes how power is used in society.

To interpret religious tradition is to enter a conflict and to make a choice. Our

appropriation of our heritage is never neutral; it displays our intention and purpose for its use. It is taking sides even if, or perhaps especially if it claims not to. (2)

Islamic feminists enunciate that all the issues of women subjugation stems from the act of interpreting the sacred texts whose understanding is largely constructed by the language which is the product of sociocultural phenomena. This is in opposition to the normally accepted versions of various existing interpretations as of divine origin. The task of their theories, then, is to reveal the underlying patriarchal ideologies within these texts because the interpretations of 'Holy texts' are full of existing ideologies which are instrumental in continuing women's oppression. Therefore, the chief motif of their theories is to develop a 'gender-just' interpretation of Quran and *Sunnah* which include women's concerns and voices in the production of religious knowledge.

Fundamentally, Islamic feminism, according to Dr Ziba Mir- Hussaini, is not something that negates the existence of men's biological qualities or that attempts to put men as second-class citizens. Rather, it tries to reclaim its long-standing dues, position, rights, liberties which were denied to half of the humankind due to patriarchy. Therefore, according to Hussaini, it is affirmation about women's humanity but at the same time it is not undermining men's humanity. Islamic feminism refers to the works produced by groups of women and activists who are feminists but they take their material from the sacred text of Islam, Quran. Or rather they re-examine and re-interpret the things, happenings and events in the light of the Quran before applying their logic and reasoning to specific concepts. Rachelle Fawcett defines it as follows:

"Islamic feminism" is not simply a feminism that is born from Muslim cultures, but one that engages Islamic theology through the text and canonical traditions... at its core, draws on the Quranic concept of equality of all human beings, and insists on the application of this theology to everyday life. (web)

Therefore, their works function within the boundaries of Islamic religious framework in the light of Sharia. Dr. Margot Badran a graduate of al-Azhar University and Oxford University defines "Islamic feminism" thusly:

...a concise definition of Islamic feminism gleaned from the writings and work of Muslim protagonists as a feminist discourse and practice that derives its understanding and mandate from the Qur'an, seeking rights and justice within the

framework of gender equality for women and men in the totality of their existence. Islamic feminism explicates the idea of gender equality as part and parcel of the Quranic notion of equality of all *insan* (human beings) and calls for the implementation of gender equality in the state, civil institutions, and everyday life. It rejects the notion of a public/private dichotomy (by the way, absent in early Islamic jurisprudence, or *fiqh*) conceptualising a holistic *umma* in which Quranic ideals are operative in all space. (qtd in Rachelle Fawcett)

However, one should not doubt their credentials to ask questions from the dominant patriarchal authority. Like any other feminists, they also challenge, subvert, and undermine the validity of every text which is written in the influence of patriarchy. As well as, they put under 'erasure' every interpretation of Quran that attempts to prove women as a second-class citizen or a lesser human being, as most of Muslims are taught that Islam liberated women by giving them rights not previously enjoyed. Some examples include rights of ownership, decision-making in marriage, and right to divorce. At the same time, they also argue for the reform of traditional jurisprudence (*fiqh*) to address the issues of gender-identity, gender-hierarchy and gender-role in Islam. Therefore, they reclaim their dues together with equality and justice that is guaranteed by the *Hadith* (sayings of Prophet) and Quran but denied owing to the 'misinterpretation' of Quran and *Hadith*. The leading Islamic feminists are Leila Ahmed, Qasim Amin, Elvia Ardalani, Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hussain, Asma Barlas Shirin Ebadi, Farid Esack, Soumya Naâmane Guessous - Zaib-un-Nissa Hamidullah, Riffat Hassan, Hamida Javanshir, Na'eem Jeenah, Shamsunnahar Mahmud, Irshad Manji, Fatema Mernissi, Ebrahim Moosa, Shirin Neshat, Asra Nomani, Nawal El Saadawi, Hoda Shaarawi, Shamima Shaikh, Zilla Huma Usman, Amina Wadud, and Ziba Mir-Hosseini. The viewpoints of these writers play a pivotal task in shifting the focal point of authority and normativity in Islamic discourses.

The chief reason behind the emergence of Islamic feminism outside the canonical feminist discourses is that many Muslim women feel that the kind of sexism, racism, and identity crisis they face is not adequately presented in the mainstream feminist discourse. Western feminist discourse is restricted to question the validity of *hijab* or triple *talaq* to highlight the plight of Muslim women. That too is with the help of lesser knowledge of Islamic theology. But, the matter-of-fact Islam is the first religion that introduced Divorce by divine law. Some-time, one may also

feel that mainstream feminist discourse has less regard for victim Muslim women but on the hind side they start attacking Islam for several ulterior motives. Therefore, Islamic feminists separate themselves from the mainstream feminist discourses which are sometimes *Islamophobic* in its very nature and tone. In this manner, they thwart the xenophobic and hegemonic claims against Islam and Muslims. In this respect Nikhat Fatima Suhail says that: “to constantly blame the scriptures for the injustices that have permeated through the ages is unfair. Knowledge and perception should play the role of the alleviator in such contexts.” Thusly, instead of condemning the Sharia as responsible for all women sufferings, Islamic feminists attempt to understand the underlying patterns and sources of patriarchy which institutionalize the male dominance over female. Their endeavor to revisit, revise, and redefine the origins of previous interpretations that act to explain and justify male dominance become a rallying point for Muslim women scholars. A leading Muslim women’s rights activist in UK, Shaista Gohir, writes in an open-letter:

Islam is neither rigid nor limited to narrow and conservative interpretations. Muslims who view Islam in that manner do not represent Islam in its entirety. Likewise, those secularists who view Islam in a reductionist manner will campaign to limit religion to the private domain and want it eliminated from all public discourse. However, our faith is not like a garment that can be cast aside as soon as we leave our home. (Qtd in Frances Perraudin)

Furthermore, Islamic feminists attempt to show that besides these two (*Hijab*, and *Talaq*) much hyped topics; there are several other important issues of Muslim women which are either completely overlooked or hardly discussed. In recent times, questions regarding family planning, motherhood, surrogacy, ovule donation need to be discussed for better physical and mental health of women in Islam. Other important issues are related with family laws pertaining to marriage and divorce that reinforce the image of relationships based on a hierarchy with the rights of the husband superseding those of the wife and that prevent women from being in control of their lives. Besides, gender discrimination, child marriage, teenage pregnancy, racism, uneven access to education, unfavorable circumstances in workplaces and lack of employment equality and the absence of political representation, are some of the burning issues which are hindering the socio-economic advancement and progress, hence, require remedy urgently.

Moreover, violence against women is an important issue to be raised by them. The reason behind this is the claim by some scholars that “beating” is permissible in certain conditions, while it is fallacious. There are also instances of abuse of certain Islamic practices that affect women negatively, such as polygamy and temporary marriage, when applied out of context and without abiding by Islamic restrictions. Women are also sometimes excluded from religious activities such as attendance in the mosque, cemeteries, and tombs, and the participation in performing different religious rituals. There is also complete failure to enable women to take the advantage of rights of property ownership and inheritance as outlined in *Sharia*. For that reason, Islamic feminists reject the kind of interpretation which sanctions the control over women’s movement and confine them in the specified domain curtailing their freedom of choice. They delineate that Islam does not dispossess the women rather it ensures their rights, dignity and honour, and equal status.

The matter of fact is that most of the evils and discriminations against women are the result of the expansion of Islam in different parts of the world and the impact of the native culture over it. Subsequently, male scholars across the world strived to interpret Islam according to their socio-political milieu. But the religion of Islam and Muslims’ cultural traditions are two extremely different things. A major drawback for practitioners is misperceiving cultural practices with religious teachings. Therefore, the greatest task of the Islamic feminist is to separate culture and religion; And, to undo the layers of subjective interpretations which are influenced by the culture of particular time and space. For example, when Islam came into India, the process of *Indianization* of Islam started taking place, the same is happening in the other parts of the world. Interestingly, one may observe that in every corner of the world religious scholars are interpreting the identical Quranic verses in totally different meaning and context. This is all because the subjective elements arise in the middle of understanding the real meaning while interpreting the text. Therefore, these mainstream interpretations are not neutral; or rather they are subjective and profoundly shaped by historic and geopolitical conditions. In addition, Quranic verses are most of the time revealed in very specific circumstances. These peculiar verses are outcomes of their times and contexts, and need not be imposed onto different times and different contexts. That is why Islamic feminism challenges different interpretations, rejecting them as subjective which are carrying the dominant patriarchal ideology.

To put it briefly, being politically and academically organized Islamic feminists fight for the rights of ‘Muslim women’. They are reclaiming their place in Islamic discourse, firstly, challenging the pre-established interpretations, secondly, presenting the sound debate over it; and lastly, they substantiated their arguments from the *Quran* without rebuffing the basic tenets of Islam. They are, thus, challenging the so-called ‘truths’, ‘realities’, and ‘knowledge’ of their existence by returning to the beginning, the *Quran* itself. Hence, the future of Islamic feminism is bright and challenging too. It is high time for male Islamic scholars as well, to shun the orthodox ideas and conservative approaches to understand the ‘female-questions’ and renounce the habit of defining the ‘roles’ for women and barricade their way to success by way of twisted logic. Now they are required to see things in a broader context beyond the realm of subjectivity and male-centered discourses. It is the right time for the Islamic intelligentsia that, with their theoretical learning, to introspect and to ruminate as far as the issues of fair-sex are concerned. This is the chief aim of feminist theorists as well. They are neither condemning the religion nor challenging the verses of Quran. They want to regain or reclaim what has been snatched away from them in lieu of religion presenting ‘skewed’ interpretations of verses. For them, women’s rights and gender-roles are not something which is absolute, fixed, unquestionable, and unchallengeable.

To reiterate the main points of the argument in this research paper:

- Feminism is a critique of patriarchy as a system and scrutinizes how patriarchy distorts the relationship between men and women that came into existence in the 1960s.
- Islamic feminism as a theory might be traced back to the 1990s. The chief motive of their theories is to develop a ‘gender-just’ interpretation of Quran and *Sunnah* which include women’s concerns and voices in the production of religious knowledge.
- The primary reason behind the emergence of Islamic feminism outside the canonical feminist discourses is that many Muslim women feel that the kind of sexism, racism, and identity crisis they face is not adequately presented in the mainstream feminist discourse.

- The greatest task of the Islamic feminist is to separate culture and religion; And, to undo the layers of subjective interpretations which are influenced by the culture of particular time and space.
- They are neither condemning the religion nor challenging the verses of Quran. They want to regain or reclaim what has been snatched away from them in lieu of religion presenting 'skewed' interpretations of verses.

Endnotes:

Quran: The Holy book of Muslims composed of 114 *suras* (chapters); originates from Arabic word that literally means recitation. This is the primary source for teaching Islamic faith.

Muslims: The follower of Islam, an Arabic word that means one who submits to God.

Hadith: Statements of Prophet Mohammad that have been written down and compiled: used as a supplement to the Quran as a secondary source.

Hijab: The *Hijab* is a headscarf that covers the hair, neck, and sometimes a woman's shoulders and chest.

Sunnah: Action of Prophet Mohammad also used to supplement the Quran as a secondary source.

Fiqh: Islamic jurisprudence. *Fiqh* is the result of reasoning and deduction based on knowledge which is constantly evolving.

Sharia: The legal practice derived from the teachings of the Quran, and the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad or *Sunnah*.

Talaq: divorce

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